A MATTER OF LIFE

May 3, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
1 Corinthians 12:4-12
Luke 10:25-37

"...a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity." -Luke 10:33 (NRSV)

A skill which you simply must develop if you wish to survive for long in the city is how to deal with homeless people, addicts, poor people who stand on the corner, sometimes singing or dancing, sometimes intoning a flat litany: "Can you spare some change? Please help the homeless," sometimes aggressively thrusting themselves into your path, but mostly just standing, sitting, "lying there beside the road." You cannot survive without that skill.

It is not terribly acute here on Michigan Avenue compared say to Calcutta, where a friend of mine, well traveled throughout the Third World, visited recently and told me he had never, in his lifetime, seen anything like it, and became physically ill; or Sudan where thousands of people will die of hunger today because of intentional government policy. It is nothing like that, but even here you must have that skill, a method, or you will not get very far down the avenue. So you can, as some do, carry lots of change in your pocket and give some to everyone who asks, or you can carry one-dollar bills and pick and choose the ones who appear to be authentic; or, as some do, you can buy gift coupons at McDonalds and give them, although we have discovered that anything is marketable if discounted a bit and that several dollar coupons sold at half-price still produce the cash to purchase cheap wine if that's the object. And some of us, probably most of us, rather intentionally walk by the man who is a regular standing at the same spot, holding a container, saying the same thing and, particularly when the tourists are about, doing fairly well actually; and in the case of the one who we can sense has singled us out and may even be walking toward us, we avert our eyes, look down or straight ahead, tuck in just a bit, tilt our head ever so slightly forward, and walk just a bit faster. It's the method most of us use, I have observed.

Although sometimes even that doesn't work. As I strode by, one man snarled at me, "Have a nice day, you bastard!" and I confess it made me very uncomfortable and very angry; and then I turned around to look and make sure it wasn't Jesus.

Around a church in the city you sooner or later hear everything, every conceivable tale of disaster, misfortune, grief and suffering - sometimes authentic, sometimes the same story or a slight variation from the one the same man told you the day before yesterday.

So we develop a skill and in some ways it is a very necessary skill or you would never negotiate half a block without breaking your heart and emptying your wallet. And I don't know about you but I never do it without thinking, for a fleeting second or so, about the man on his way to Jericho who saw another man lying beside the road and who when he came near, was moved with pity.

The trouble with the Good Samaritan is that he makes us feel guilty. But his story is actually quite complex and when read carefully contains a few surprises. The first surprise is that the story is in fact an answer to a question and the question is not "What is the morally responsible method for dealing with people lying by the roadside?" nor is the question "Who is my neighbor?" The original question was, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And so our observation ought to focus first on that and what it is and what the lawyer was really wanting.

Eternal life - when the lawyer asked Jesus what he had to do to get some of it, he did not mean merely existence in a celestial paradise after he died. That's too small actually. What he was asking about was full and joyful and whole and happy and completely human life now - in the present; life so thorough in all its dimensions that death is nothing compared to it; life like we try to talk about it on Easter and are reduced to singing hymns and admiring flowers and holding each other close. Jesus knows what the question is. It's the oldest question in history - maybe the best question in history: "How can I live my life as fully as possible? How can I use it up, enjoy it, invest it... look back on it one day with a sense - not of emptiness and futility, but fulfillment, completion?" Jesus knows the question. He gets the lawyer to recite the prescribed answer, which is "love." "Love God with heart, soul, strength and mind and neighbor as self," Jesus says. "Do it and you will be truly and totally alive."

I suppose the lawyer doesn't want to hear that because he knows it is true. So he tries to change the subject. He knows he doesn't love enough, so he tries to alter the agenda. "Who is my neighbor?" he asks and Jesus, the master storyteller, answers

in a way that sounds at first like a definition of neighbor; but the energy of the story is how to be a neighbor because the original question is still his focus.

So, before you are paralyzed by guilt about the way you fail to be Samaritan every day, at least consider the fact that he is not so much a model of good behavior as he is an example of what it means to be alive - fully, joyfully, humanly alive.

On a notoriously dangerous road a man is mugged, left to die. A priest and a Levite, religious officials see him and slip into their urban survival mode, tighten up a bit, look straight ahead, move actually to the other side so as not to see much more and walk on. A Samaritan, a social and religious outcast, sees, has compassion, stops, deals with him, binds up his wounds, carries him to town, arranges for his care, even thinks to arrange payment for extended care.

"How can I inherit eternal life?"

"Go and do likewise," said Jesus.

"Don't exaggerate the deficiencies of the Priest and Levite" warn the New Testament scholars. [See Fred Craddock, Interpretation, Luke, p. 151] And how the preacher loves to do just that; hold up these two unimaginative characters as models of selfishness, insensitivity, and sin. Actually, they are very reasonable people. You and I make decisions like theirs every day of our lives. It may even be helpful to know that for both of them there were important reasons for not stopping. If the victim was a gentile, or worse yet, a dead gentile, the religious officials would be rendered "unclean" by any physical contact and for the priest that meant at least a week of unemployment until he could be purified. He could be a minister unable to preach, a physician unable to see patients, a counselor unable to see her clients for a week. Not even to mention the oldest scam on record which was in fact practiced on that road: a decoy acts hurt, someone stops, two others appear and hit the one in the act of trying to help. It happens at Water Tower Place, on buses and trains every day. Someone appeared to faint on a CTA train and some of us shouted to the unsuspecting tourist with a Cincinnati Reds baseball cap on, "Be careful; keep your hand on your wallet." So, priest and Levite are not morally reprehensible. They are normally reasonable, careful people.

And now the second surprise. The priest and the Levite are the actual victims in the story. If anyone is dead or at least not fully alive, they are, not the man by the road who, please notice, retains his anonymity throughout. The Samaritan of course is gloriously alive. He's the lover; he is full of passion, caring, eros, verve, exuberance, love. The ones so caught up in their religious system, so driven, so captive to custom,

fear, obligation that they don't dare risk caring; they are the ones to keep your eye on, Jesus told the lawyer.

Robert Wuthnow, a sociologist at Princeton University, has written a number of books about our culture which everybody is discussing, most recently, Acts of Compassion: Caring for Others and Helping Ourselves. In that book, Wuthnow observes that compassion has been an important part of our value system from the beginning. Today, if we don't learn to care, we'll not make it. Governor John Winthrop told the Massachusetts Puritans still on board ship: "We must delight in each other, make others condition our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together." [Wuthnow, p. 9]

Wuthnow reports that 80 million Americans are engaged as volunteers in some kind of caring activity for an average of five hours per week and that the value of the tasks performed is $150 billion annually.

Wuthnow worries that we are inclined to do good in order to feel good. He can't imagine Jesus saying to his disciples: "Take up your cross and follow me - it'll make you feel good." [p. 87]

And yet there are undeniable positive effects. Psychology Today reported that "caregivers experience subtle but sweet rewards for caring for frail loved ones." A Gallop Poll revealed that people who donate money or time to charitable causes score higher on various measures of self-esteem than those who do not.

Wuthnow concludes that sociologically compassion is a good thing. It produces a sense of linkage, a chain of caring, and it nurtures a very important value in the culture - something called "common humanity." How important is that?

I think we have seen this week how important it is; that in a very real sense our society is threatened, not by external enemies, but by our refusal to care, our blindness to what life is like for many Americans, our intentional passing by on the other side of the road.

Ironically, I wrote this sermon on Wednesday morning, went to O'Hare and got on a plane to Los Angeles. We landed through the first smoke Wednesday evening. I was there until early Friday morning and while that does not make me an expert, I did see it, experience it closely, smell it, and tried to attend to the business for which I was there - while ten minutes away stores were being looted and people were being killed.

There were several African-American Presbyterians at the meeting. One of them said to me about the Rodney King verdict, "Thank you for your concern, but you will never know what it feels like to be black and in trouble with the police."

Now, police officers do what most of us would not want to do. They work hard; urban police risk their lives and sometimes lose them, for not very much money. The lesson here is not that police are insensitive or racist. The lesson which we must learn is that police do reflect the way the society thinks.

I recalled the black college professor, waiting for his wife who was making a speech; he was window shopping, looking at a jewelry store, and was arrested, roughed up.

And I read this morning about Thaddeus Garrett, a Domestic Policy Advisor to President Bush, who was picked up by the police, walking through Embassy Row in jeans and tee shirt. It was Garrett who this Friday finally told the President, and who was instrumental in persuading President Bush to acknowledge a denial of justice which has assaulted every American regardless of color.

We will be thinking and talking about this for a long time; but it seems to me that Christians should, today, know in a new way that the compassion which their Lord taught is absolutely imperative if we are to live...

- that racism, the fundamental denial of the humanity of other people because of their race, is still very much with us, and that there is work to be done;

- that all the looters are not expressing rage, but that nothing is so arrogant as the refusal to acknowledge that people are deeply and profoundly hurt;

- and that when the racism which exists in ugly ethnic humor, for instance, when that racism combines with an economic philosophy which produces incredible wealth for a few and incredible poverty for many, there is a state of injustice among us and that unless we repent of that, life - individual lives, but surely the life of this nation, will remain in mortal danger.

How important is it? Lewis Thomas has written a fine new book on the human prospect entitled <u>The Fragile Species.</u> "The future," Thomas believes, "depends on our getting along and recognizing, celebrating our common humanity." [p. 26]

It's important because sometimes we forget it. <u>The New York Times</u> last week reviewed a disturbing book, <u>Ordinary Men, Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland</u>. It's about a battalion of thirty and forty-year-old men from

Hamburg, in World War II, too old for conscription, whose job it was to execute Jews and who did it. How was it possible? How did the unthinkable happen? After extensive research and interviews, the author concludes that for the people who did it, or watched it, "the Jews were not in the same human family as they." That's why it is important to remember the Holocaust - because ordinary people forgot for a while.

It's important to remember as well that compassion is corporate as well as individual; that societies are caring or uncaring, as societies. Most scholars quip that if the Samaritan found another man along side the road the next day, on his return trip, he would have been remiss if he did not at least inquire of the political authorities about conditions on the Jericho Road. So it begins immediately with your personal encounter with human need; but at some point, common humanity and common morality dictate a broader societal encounter. It is private and corporate. It is tutoring a youngster and voting for representatives who will take seriously public education, and housing and employment and health care. We need a thousand "Points of Light" and we need a power source - a spirit of caring corporately for human beings in this country who are not now and will never be touched by acts of private benevolence - the chemically dependent, the crack baby who never makes it to the hospital to be rocked, the AIDS victim dying alone, the mentally ill homeless whose behavior itself drives away even the most patient and caring volunteer, the children who do not vote and do not contribute to Political Action Committees and who pay the price for our unwillingness to care, our selfishness, our lack of compassion.

For some of us the point of contact with this story of the Good Samaritan is the person who was set upon by robbers, beaten, stripped, left to die. For some of us, life has been hard and cruel: set upon by forces more powerful than we, pushed around, punched, assaulted, ignored - some of us know what it means to be lying by the side of the road. And there is a sense in which all of us, sometime or another, know that. And the Gospel is that Jesus the Good Samaritan comes and kneels by our side and binds up our wounds and cares for us completely and ultimately.

But perhaps for most of us, the point of contact is with the two people who walked by, such ordinary people, caught up in the busyness of living, captives, not of evil forces, but their jobs, their life-style, their religion, so determined and busy they didn't have time or inclination to love God or neighbor or self for that matter.

They are the victims, the ones who are missing life. And so are we, I fear, to the degree their behavior mirrors our own.

The Good Samaritan - the lover - is alive.

Who or what is most precious to you? The person who gives you gifts, the business that pays your salary, the account that generates an income stream? Not really. According to this story - according to the one who told it - the most important person in your life, the most precious institution, is the one that stimulates you to love and give and to feel passion and pain and joy and to weep tears of happiness and sorrow.

Of course you cannot empty your purse every time you see someone in need. But do give it a thought. Try it sometime. Give your heart, give your all; love someone - some needy person, some cause, your nation, this city, the Gospel of Christ, your church even - so much that you feel pain and hunger in yourself and anger. Love someone, some cause, so much that you do stop in your tracks and open your heart and your life.

Do it, he promised - and you - even you - will live.

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God of compassion, forgive us for forgetting that we are all your children.

Free us to care, and in our caring to live fully; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.